

The last word — Hollywood

by the Editors

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American capitalism finds its sharpest and most expressive reflection in the American cinema.
—Sergei Eisenstein

To acknowledge Hollywood is to acknowledge reality. No consideration of film can get very far without facing the inescapable fact of Hollywood, for American commercial film is world cinema (as Godard and Gorin put it, “MosFilm-Paramount”), a cultural side product of imperialism. But everyone knows the monolithic influence of Hollywood, here and abroad, though an amazing bulk of film criticism prefers to ignore the monolith’s mass and merely polish up a small surface of it in order to play Narcissus.

To acknowledge Hollywood, however, does not mean to uncritically embrace it. Hollywood is not the answer, it is the problem. We need a film criticism that deals with the complexity of contemporary cinema. Obviously this means recognizing Hollywood as an industry and the essentially commodity nature of film. It also means examining the dream factory’s dreams: explaining the message and pointing out the contradictions within film and between film and social reality, and showing the abnormality in human terms of what passes for normal because it is dominant.

JUMP CUT’s work must include analyzing commercial cinema and breaking down the mystified standards created by Hollywood’s domination of film. These phony standards bestow an importance on a 35mm or 70mm film not given to 16mm, 8mm, or video. They give an importance to fictional narrative and 90 minute melodrama not given to documentary, animation, shorts, comedy, and nonrepresentational film. And these standards are used to judge films which themselves reject Hollywood—such as underground, Third World, and feminist, and radical films.

As we said in our introductory editorial, JUMP CUT is committed to developing a radical film criticism. We say “developing” because, while we're usually aghast at what passes for critical thought in the film establishment, we are often embarrassed by the existing alternatives. It is all too common for radical critics to damn Hollywood films for being what they are: bourgeois, sexist, racist, etc.—in short, oppressive. That stance leaves very little to do but say the same thing over and over. But such an approach begs the question of Hollywood's popularity and ignores the implications as well as the lessons to be learned. A true radical criticism must understand the role of entertainment in society and recognize uncomplicated amusement as a worthy human activity. We are especially wary of two fallacies frequently held by radical intellectuals interested in film. The first is to see Hollywood films as the most direct type of indoctrination: a kind of propaganda for the status quo which is mindlessly swallowed by the mass audience. This is not only wrong, it is elitist, for it implies that the critic by virtue of his or her radical and/or intellectual nature is insulated from the effects of commercial films, while common people are totally naive in their viewing. The second fallacy—an inverse of the first—assumes that films are unimportant because “politics” is more important than “culture” (as if the two could be readily separated in practice), or because films are just distractions. But clearly Hollywood films are a significant part of bourgeois ideological hegemony. And as such they influence the consciousness with which objective conditions are perceived.

The intellectual work needed to develop a radical film criticism involves several areas. First must be a deepening of analysis and the tools of analysis. Film criticism has frequently evaded taking itself seriously and its object of study seriously with the “it's only a movie” cop-out from thinking. Second, film as a popular art must be understood in a social context. The internal history approach and the purely aesthetic and formal approach are evasions from dealing with what makes film a popular art—people. Third, as cultural workers we must link film criticism to the need for cultural intervention — politicizing film criticism. Neither JUMP CUT nor all the other institutions of film study can change Hollywood, but we can develop a way of thinking about film that blocks naive critical perceptions about Hollywood.

But that is not enough. We must also turn our understanding of cinema to the creation and development of an alternative and oppositional cinema that will not simply reflect and reinforce the status quo but recognize and affirm the need to change society. To do any less is to create a collaborationist film criticism.